

Douglas Creek Wildlife Management Area *Draft Resource Management Plan*

INTRODUCTION

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) proposes to purchase up to 3,594 contiguous acres (the Land) approximately 6 miles north of Drummond, MT, to establish the Douglas Creek Wildlife Management Area. This draft management plan discloses FWP's management intent for public review and comment, and for documenting existing information for future reference. This document conveys interim management policies and strategies for the property while the long term and supplemental management plans are developed.

Goals:

- Permanently protect and restore important native wildlife habitat;
- Provide perpetual public recreational access to lands with high and diverse public recreation value;
- Contribute to the overall function, integrity, and management of adjacent private, DNRC, and Bureau of Land Management lands; and
- Maintain the Land as working forest and range.

ACQUISITION DATE

FWP plans to acquire fee title to the property from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in December, 2011, pending public review and approval.

CHAIN OF OWNERSHIP

The Land was purchased from Plum Creek Timber Company by The Nature Conservancy in 2004 as part of a larger 89,000 conservation initiative (The Blackfoot Community Project). The Land has been owned and managed by TNC since that time. Following MFWP's purchase of the Land, it will be managed as the Douglas Creek Wildlife Management Area by MFWP.

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

Location:

The Land lies approximately 6 miles north of Drummond, MT at the headwaters of Black Bear and Douglas Creeks (Fig 1).

Acreage to be Acquired:

Township 12 North, Range 13 West, P.M.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 13: Govt. Lots 1-4, W1/2E1/2, W1/2

Section 14: All

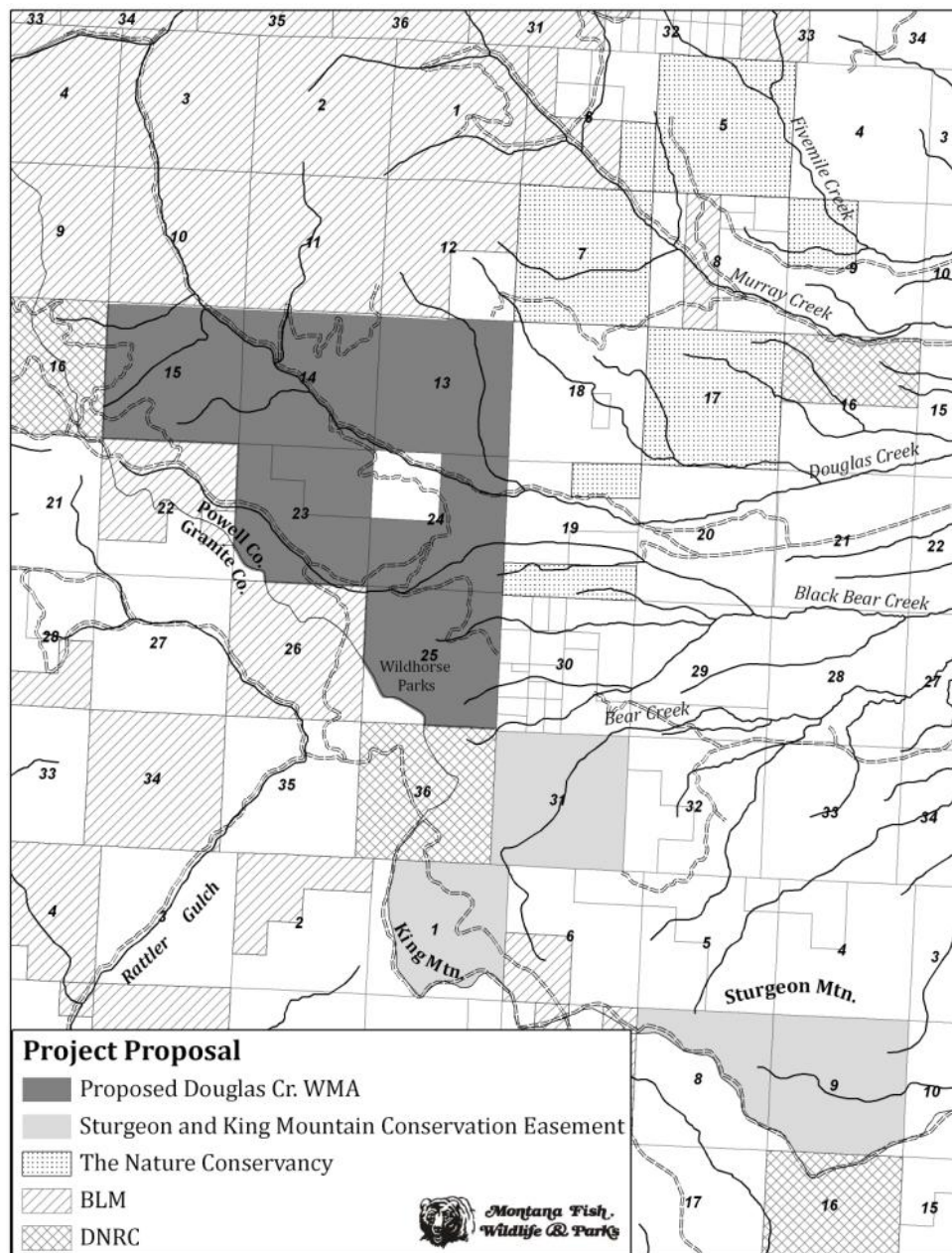
Section 15: All

Section 23: All that portion located in Powell County

Section 24: Govt. Lots 1-4, W1/2NE1/4, W1/2SE1/4, SW1/4

Section 25: All that portion located in Powell County

Figure 1.



The Land lies within a matrix of DNRC, Nature Conservancy, and Bureau of Land Management land and private land (Figure. 1). Significant nearby TNC and other private land may be protected by conservation easements during a future project phase.

A single 160-acre private inholding exists within the proposed WMA. This property is bisected by the main public open road within the proposed WMA (also encumbered by a BLM road-use easement). No additional roads will need to be opened or maintained to provide the landowner access to this currently undeveloped property and Powell County zoning provisions preclude significant subdivision of the parcel.

LANDFORMS AND DRAINAGE

The subject land lies at the headwaters of Black Bear and Douglas Creeks, part of the Blackfoot River Watershed, in the western Garnet Mountains. Elevations range from 5,000 – 6,200 feet; slope and aspect vary.

VEGETATION

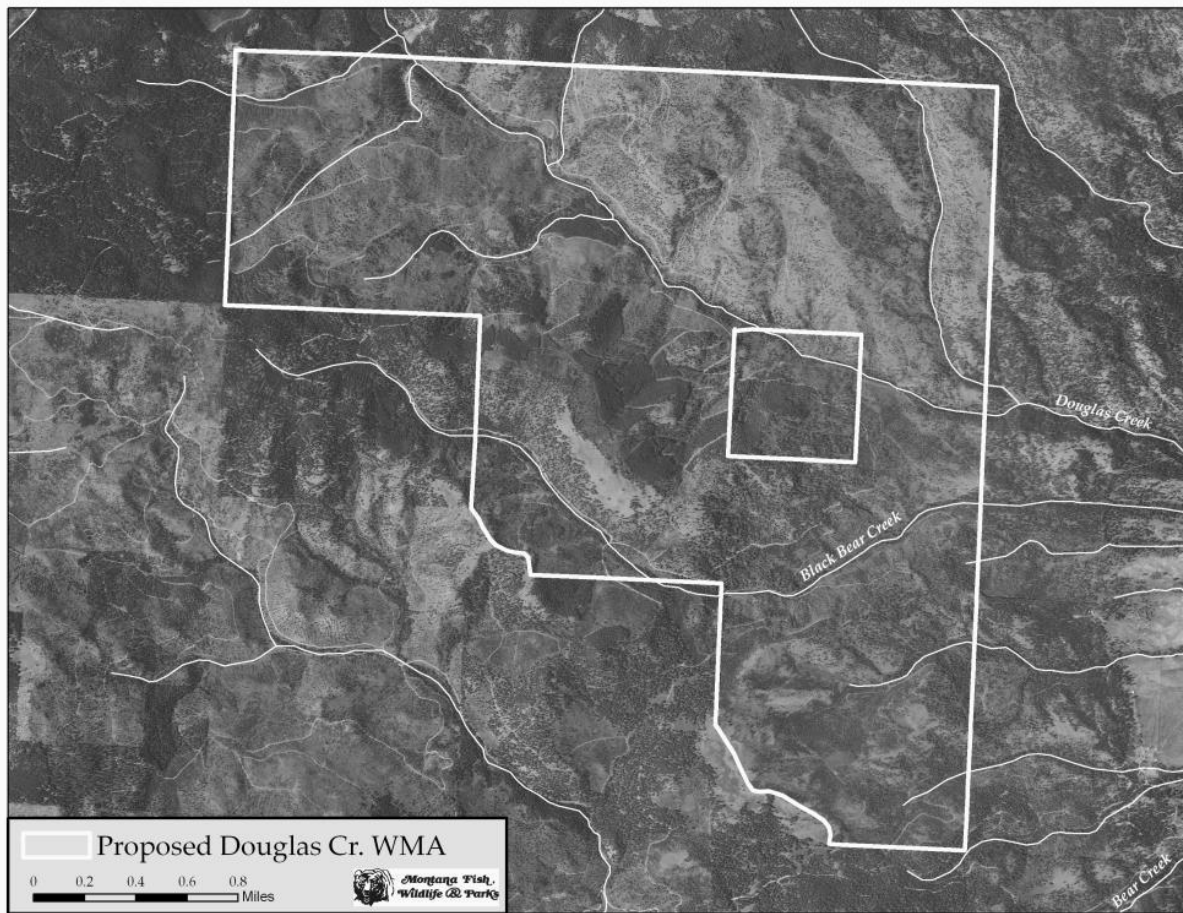
The subject lands are almost completely forested (Figure 2). The most abundant conifer tree species on the property is Douglas-fir. Ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine are common while western larch and Englemann spruce occur more rarely. Aspen is the primary deciduous tree species present. Sites are generally dry and timber productivity and regeneration is moderate.

The forest understory vegetation includes common snowberry, pinegrass, elk sedge, heartleaf arnica, white spirea, kinnikinnick, Oregon grape, serviceberry, and twinflower. Common forest habitat types are Douglas fir/snowberry, Douglas fir/twinflower, and Douglas fir/ pine grass.

Most forest stands on the property have been managed for industrial timber production. Timber harvest has significantly decreased the abundance of old growth, large diameter, ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. Current forest stands generally include open overstories of Douglas fir with understories of sapling, seedling and pole-sized Douglas-fir on moist aspects and grass on drier aspects. Ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine regeneration is present but not abundant in most areas.

Bluebunch wheatgrass, rough fescue, arrowleaf balsamroot and Idaho fescue are present on dry aspects and in forest openings. Fire suppression over the last 80 years has likely reduced the overall grassland acreage.

Figure 2.



Riparian corridors occur along perennial reaches of Douglas and Black Bear Creeks. Riparian vegetation is primarily alder and sedge, with lesser amounts of willow and cottonwood.

No Montana State listed Plant Species of Concern are known to occur on the property.

Several species of noxious weeds occur throughout the property at various levels of infestation. Weeds are most prevalent on roadsides and on drier aspects with grassy understories and sparse forest canopy cover. The most prevalent weed species include; cheatgrass, spotted knapweed, hound's tongue, and thistles.

WILDLIFE HABITAT

The Land provides important summer and fall/transitional range for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. Elk, mule deer, and moose may use significant portions of the property during winter at times and during years when snowpack is less limiting.

A portion of the East Garnet elk herd unit annually migrates out of the Helmville Valley to winter on the open faces between Bearmouth and Drummond. The subject lands lie within this migratory corridor.

The Land provides important habitat for other big game species including moose, black bear, wolf, and mountain lion. Bobcat, pine marten, mountain grouse, raptors, and dozens of passerine bird species are also common.

The area is popular with big game hunters throughout the open hunting seasons.

The Land does not include high quality Canada lynx habitat nor would production of lynx habitat be a reasonable management objective. That said, one of the southernmost, naturally occurring populations of Canada lynx in the American west occurs adjacent to project lands (in the higher elevation areas of the Garnet mountains) and the Land contributes to the function of a putative north/south movement corridor.

Grizzly bear presence on and around the subject property has increased significantly in recent years as the bear's range continues to expand to the south. Today, grizzly sightings on or near the subject land are common.

FISHERIES HABITAT

Douglas Creek supports a native resident westslope cutthroat trout population. Both Douglas Cr. and Black Bear Cr. contribute to the overall health and function of the Blackfoot River by affecting sediment load and water temperature. Both creeks are significantly dewatered downstream of the subject property.

MFWP has ranked both creeks as being moderate restoration priorities.

IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT

Forest roads are the primary improvement on the property. Their condition varies from relatively poor to high-standard. A detailed spatial and qualitative inventory of roads on the property would be conducted following purchase and roads would be brought to BMP standards or removed over time. The open road system provides good public access to the property; much of the open road system is subject to road easements held by the BLM. MFWP does not anticipate that significant closures of currently open roads will be necessary.

Some cattle fencing is present; its condition varies. Existing fence will be mapped following acquisition of the property and considered as and if livestock grazing is reintroduced or if trespass grazing becomes a management concern.

MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Forest Management

MFWP recognizes the need to actively manage the forested wildlife habitat under its ownership. The Department has the tools and authority it needs to manage large scale forest management projects and began to implement them in the Blackfoot on a large scale in 2010. MFWP will consider fire risk mitigation, forest health, and wildlife habitat enhancement needs in making forest management decisions. The 2011 MT Legislature has directed MFWP to conduct an inventory of its forested habitat; this and other efforts will continue to inform management.

Grazing Management

The property has not been leased for grazing since at least 2004 although some trespass grazing does occur. On some WMAs in Montana, FWP has entered into Cooperative Habitat Management Agreements and structured grazing systems with adjoining landowners which provide for grazing treatments and periodic yearlong rest from livestock grazing on the private—as well as WMA—properties for the enhancement of big game forage (typically) across the broader landscape. FWP would not begin its ownership of the Douglas Cr. WMA under any such obligation, but would be open to exploring such possibilities if they would appear to meet resource objectives in the future.

Public Recreational Access

Douglas Creek WMA will be open to public use year round for motorized travel on open roads, snowmobiling, hunting, camping, hiking, horseback riding, mountain bicycling, and general enjoyment. Wheeled motorized vehicles will be restricted to the designated open road system (no wheeled motorized vehicles allowed off roads or on closed roads) year round. The open road system will initially be similar to that existing at time of purchase and MFWP does not anticipate the need to further restrict wheeled motorized routes. Camping will be allowed year-round but limited to a 16-day maximum stay (motorized vehicles restricted to the road shoulder or pullouts). Fire restrictions may be implemented, as wildfire-risk dictates. Firewood cutting will be restricted to downed trees that lie outside riparian areas and will be allowed by FWP-issued permit only. Permits will be required for use by groups of more than 15 people. Hunting opportunity will be managed consistent with that in the surrounding hunting districts (i.e. deer/elk HDs 292 and 298); no Douglas Creek WMA-specific hunting regulations are anticipated.

Road maintenance to reasonably support public travel and ongoing property management will constitute a significant and recurring expense. The maintenance standard for open roads will be to reasonably accommodate a 4-wheel drive vehicle with good ground clearance. This standard is now generally met on the open road system, but will require regular maintenance. Roads and culverts will be inspected for compliance with Best Management Practices and compatibility with fish and wildlife habitat values; any noncompliance or resource needs will be corrected on a prioritized basis. Maintenance of gates and barriers will be required to restrict motorized vehicle access to the closed road system. Signage will be required at the main access points to communicate the public access and other regulations on the WMA. Boundary signage will also be needed to identify the WMA property line in some places.

Noxious Weed Management

MFWP maintains an active noxious weed control program on all lands that it manages. MFWP will coordinate with Powell Co. to develop an integrated noxious weed management plan during the spring and summer of 2012. MFWP will treat spotted knapweed infestations along roadsides and continue biocontrol releases (initiated by TNC) to manage more widespread knapweed infestations. Hound's tongue will also be treated along roadsides and in other accessible areas to help prevent further spread. New invaders will be treated aggressively when detected.

Fire Prevention and Suppression

Fire suppression on the Douglas Creek WMA would fall under existing jurisdictions. Wildfires would be subject to immediate suppression upon detection. In an attempt to prevent human-caused ignitions, MFWP and DNRC may institute temporary, emergency measures to progressively restrict public access if and as summer-fall drought conditions intensify in some years.